

Following the Witch's Path by listlessness

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Summary:

Leaving Hawkins and going to college in Massachusetts was meant to be a fresh start for Robin and Steve.

Things always have a way of catching up, though.

Following the Witch's Path

Author's Note:

- For [FreshBrains](#).

This was written for [FreshBrains](#) as part of the 2021 Femslash Kink Exchange. I had a lot of fun writing this, and one of your prompts excited me a little too much and I got a touch carried away.

(I also developed a pretty bad chest infection halfway through writing this, so I didn't quite flesh out the plot as much as I had planned - I hope you still enjoy it!)

PS I only know very, very, very basic Russian.
Здравствуйте, хочу купить унитаза.

The acceptance letter and package from Smith College arrived the first week of December. After sharing the good news with her family, Robin raced to tell Steve. He hid his shock smoothly behind a smile and congratulated her.

Robin already had a plan. She would spend the first year living on campus. In her second year she'd move into a shared accommodation off campus with either some close acquaintances or strangers; she didn't want to risk any friendships. Then, in her third year, perhaps she'd have been dating a girl for long enough to feel comfortable moving in with her and trying to have a serious relationship.

She bought spare sheets and a brown leather jacket with a wool collar. She found a cookbook with simple recipes that could be made in a dorm and purchased a transit map of Boston.

The thrill of leaving Hawkins behind grew each and everyday. She would study European languages with a minor in music theory and work in some neat bookstore part time and escape the confines of a small town. She'd come back only for summer break and Christmas (and maybe Thanksgiving

That was her plan.

Even the best laid plans tended to fall askew, though.

She did manage to get into European languages, but music theory turned out to be more of a drag than she'd intended. She wound up changing her minor to classical history, which probably had as few career options (in the words of her father) but she enjoyed more. And she did wind up living on campus for all of her first year, but when the second year started and she had yet to find anybody to move off campus with, Robin found herself frustrated. She went home over Thanksgiving, had lunch with Steve, and an offhand remark led to him moving in with her in an apartment a half dozen blocks from the college a week after Martin Luther King Jr Day.

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Robin had never intended to fall out of contact with people from Hawkins, but it wound up happening fairly quickly. The only person from school she remained in touch with was Steve, and by the time he moved in with her, he became her tether to the life she had left behind. Where Robin had tried to put the past behind her and find a future in an uncertain world, Steve's life had been entwined so long with Hawkins that he couldn't so easily escape.

It wasn't unusual for her to come home from a day of classes to see him on the phone to Dustin while cooking dinner (he had managed to finally figure out spaghetti bolognese), or if him to discuss going back down to Hawkins over long weekends when Robin didn't even want to think of it. Hawkins, for Steve, was still home.

She should have anticipated it catching up with her eventually.

They were sitting together over breakfast on a Wednesday morning when Steve dropped the news. He was dressed in his RadioShack uniform while she was mouthing German verbs under her breath as she scanned her notes.

'Nancy's driving up tomorrow. Is it okay if she stays a few days?'

Robin froze. Her eyes ran up, over her bowl of Cheerios, and landed

on Steve's face.

'You still talk to her?'

She didn't mean to sound so brusque. Steve had every right to talk to whoever he wanted to. He was an amiable guy and always had a good word to say about everyone. She was only surprised. That was it. Surprised and a little bit jealous, just a little bit, because she'd been in college for two and a half years now and she'd only been on two dates and nothing more had happened than an awkward kiss on the cheek with the first girl.

She needed to take up a sport. Volleyball, maybe, even though she could barely spike a ball.

'Sometimes.'

'Is she... what's she doing?'

Steve shrugged. He wasn't being coy; Robin didn't think he could be coy. This was just Steve, hearing an old friend (an old *girlfriend*) needed a place to crash for some reason and he'd gone and offered their apartment.

'Where's she going to sleep?' Robin asked, as she turned and looked several feet to the left where their second-hand couch was stacked with her college textbooks and Steve's radio controlled airplane hobby.

'She can take my room. I can sleep on the couch.'

'Steve- '

'It's only a few days. You'll never know she's here. Seriously, she's asked for it to be low-key.'

Robin immediately disliked the sound of that. Something inside her twisted and she wondered if she could find an excuse to sleep in the college library for those nights.

*

It unfortunately turned out that the campus library closed at midnight on weeknights and at ten PM on the weekend. Robin tried to hold her tongue when she was informed by the staff there, and though she made some complaint about having an assignment due the next day (a lie) and her need to get it done on time (it had been finished for three days), she was still ushered away.

If questioned, Robin wouldn't have been able to say why she was so bothered by Nancy coming to stay. Sure, the notice was much shorter than she would normally appreciate, but that was also just Steve being Steve. She knew what he was like. He'd give someone the shirt off his back if he thought it would help.

When she returned home in the wee hours of Thursday evening, wishing she'd done something more than bend over a book to earn her pounding headache, Robin was welcomed by the sounds of light laughter and the smell of coffee. Although part of her wanted to creep into her bedroom, shove a door snake against the crack to block the sound and pass right on out, her good upbringing told her to say hello to their new guest.

'Yo! Yo, Robin, come say hi!'

Yeah. Like Steve would let her slip off.

Walking into the living room with what she hoped was an appropriately exhausted stoop and her book bag positioned in such a way to advertise just how much work she had to catch up on, she shuffled in. Steve was on the couch, facing Robin when she came in. Sitting on the ground in front of the coffee table, her back to the doorway, was Nancy.

'Hi, Steve. Nancy. I have a lot to do, so- '

As she went to finish making her excuses, Nancy turned to look over at her. As she did, her wide, blue eyes locking upon her, it hit Robin hard as to why she had been trying to avoid seeing her.

It had been a long running joke between her and Steve that they both had the same taste in women. Steve, by way of being a man, had a much easier time in being flirted with. Just once did Robin want a

chance to have a crack at it. And, as Nancy smiled at her and lazily blinked with what had to be just simply exhaustion and not a flirty look, Robin quietly wished she had made some lame excuse and driven back down to Hawkins herself.

'Hi, Robin,' Nancy said. She placed a hand on the coffee table to leverage herself up.

Robin watched her unfold herself with a languid elegance. She gaped a little, stumbled back, waved and finally jerked her thumb to her bedroom door.

'I've got- I've got... life. School. College,' Robin said, stumbling over her words. 'I've got a lot of work to do. Schoolwork. College... work. I haven't had a life since I decided to change to a double major, *hah*.'

As she forced an awkward laugh, Robin heard herself snort loudly. Humiliation hit her cheeks and she turned and scurried into her room. Yeah, smooth move. She'd been spending too much time with Steve.

Before she shut her door, she heard Steve laughing softly to Nancy.

'Yeah, college makes people *weird*. Lucky we escaped, huh?'

Her bedroom door shut with a click. A heavy sigh escaped her lips as she turned and pressed her back to it, her head thumping gently as she closed her eyes and sunk to the ground. It was only a few days. She'd survived being tortured by goddamn Russians; being under the same roof as Nancy couldn't be as hard.

*

It was a small blessing that Robin was a morning person. She could creep out as early as possible, while the sun was still kissing the horizon, and escape off to the sanctuary of the campus.

Unfortunately, it also seemed as though Nancy was also fond of waking early. As Robin crept through the living room in socked feet to avoid waking Steve (who snored like the devil), she could hear rustling from the second bedroom and light spilling out from under the doorway.

Maybe, just maybe, if Robin made herself scarce and gave the impression of being extremely busy, it wouldn't be so suspect that she wasn't home during Nancy's visit. One problem she had, though, was that it wasn't all that clear how long she'd been staying for, and as the week turned into the weekend, Robin was at a loss for how to ask. Sure, she had a small part-time job to busy herself with on Saturdays (not the bookstore she had dreamed of, but filing medical documents at a local clinic), she didn't want to be out of her apartment all weekend.

When she returned home that Saturday evening, chastising herself for being ridiculous, Robin decided she'd just have to face up to it. If the situation were reversed, she'd have already smacked Steve in the back of the head and told him to man up. Metaphorically. Steve had had too many head injuries by this time.

There was the soft murmur of words coming from the living room that filtered through to the kitchen when she stepped inside the apartment. As she set the keys down on the counter, the whispering abruptly stopped. Curious.

And, as something in her gut began to sink, Robin also knew it to be disconcerting.

She toed out of her shoes, grabbed a bruised banana from the makeshift Tupperware container that was being used as a fruit bowl, and went to the living room. When she entered, Nancy was hastily sweeping some papers off the coffee table and Steve was trying to stop her.

This wasn't a good sign.

'Wait- ' Steve hissed.

'No,' Nancy replied in the same tone of voice.

'She can help!'

'Jesus Christ,' Robin mumbled and pinched the bridge of her nose.

Resigned to her fate, Robin crossed to the coffee table, held her hand and stared Steve down until he passed her one of the pages. She

didn't even need to look at it to know what it potentially was.

'Hawkins?' she asked.

The pair in front of her shared uneasy glances.

'Well, yeah, but- '

'Is this why you're up here?' Robin went on, cutting Steve off as she dared to shoot Nancy a glance.

'Mm-hmm.'

As Nancy nodded and hummed her confirmation, Robin eased down into one of the mismatched seats, her leg tucked underneath her. The page was full of Russian. It wasn't clear where Nancy had got it from, or even why she'd driven all the way up to Massachusetts to give it to Steve.

'You know I've only done three semesters of Russian, right?' she said. That was being generous- it was actually two full semesters and what she was currently studying.

'Yeah, but it's more than both of us,' Steve said.

'It's about... what happened,' Nancy said, side-stepping what had happened to all of them several years ago. 'The lab. We think there might be a base here somewhere. Well... Boston. Massachusetts.'

Robin audibly sucked at her teeth. She could think of it as practice for her class.

'Get me a pencil,' she said, waving her hand as she curled up on the seat. 'And my dictionary.'

At the request, Steve launched up off the couch and went to grab the items, no doubt glad Robin had agreed with minimal argument. Beyond being an excuse to improve her Russian, it would also mean she didn't have to look directly at Nancy.

And, maybe, it might just impress her.

Although Robin started the translation that evening, it wasn't done by morning. The code she had deciphered at the mall all those years ago had been a set of simple phrases that, once she'd begun to crack the sounds, she could begin to figure it out. This time it wasn't so clear. There was some letter substitution going on, and although Robin's familiarity of Russian had grown over her time at college, she was still by no means an expert.

She needed a better handle at Russian. She needed a better dictionary. She needed *sleep*. More than anything she needed sleep.

Nancy retreated to Steve's bedroom as the clock ticked over to two and Steve himself fell over on the couch into a restless slumber shortly after. As Robin stretched out her back, she looked at the paperwork the pair had attempted to help her with. They had done their best to follow her instructions on looking for repeated symbols and letters; she'd suggested they look for vowels first, but their familiarity with the Cyrillic lettering left something to be desired.

Despite the multiple pages, there was one passage in particular that grabbed Robin's attention. It was made up of four short lines and seemed to have been photocopied from a different stack of instructions. It didn't seem to follow the same code as the rest of the stack, either, which made it more frustrating to decipher. Something about it itched at her, nagging to be decrypted.

With a heavy sigh, she threw her pencil down, stood, and decided to crawl into her bed as well. The only thing she'd achieve at this point would be making mistakes.

Sleep came easily and readily, and it wasn't until the mid-morning sun began to hit her directly in the eyes through the blinds that Robin awoke the following morning. As she lay in bed, craving death or coffee, her mind immediately turned to the Russian pages. God help her for having agreed to Steve and Dustin's stupid game.

'Up. Time to get up,' she muttered to herself. Her brain protested her decision even as her body began to move.

A shower helped, as did a fresh pair of clothes. As she shuffled from her bedroom, a towel wrapped around her head as her hair dried, she heard the sound of dishes clinking in the kitchen. Assuming it to be Steve, she headed towards it, yawning and feeling her jaw crack.

'You better be making me eggs,' she said around another yawn.

'Oh- I wasn't,' came the quick reply in a voice that definitely wasn't Steve's. 'But I can, if you hang on a few minutes.'

Nancy.

Robin stopped, partway into the kitchen, and looked about. The usual pile of dishes had been cleaned up, aside from a fry pan on the stove that was currently sizzling with bacon. There was no sign of Steve. Robin also hoped it wasn't immediately obvious that she was trying to avoid looking at Nancy, given she was also still in a pair of oversized pyjamas and looked frustratingly adorable. Goddammit.

'I- I just- you don't need to- ' Robin stammered out.

With a cool shrug, Nancy went back to the fridge. 'I have younger siblings. I'm used to it.'

'Please don't think of me as a younger sibling.'

Nancy laughed and shook her head. God-double-dammit. Robin didn't want to be doing this right now.

She hovered for a moment, wondering if she should make them coffee, but Nancy waved a hand at her before she could say anything and Robin retreated instead to sit at the breakfast bar. Heaving herself up onto a stool, she folded her arms on the counter and tried to pretend she wasn't watching Nancy.

'I haven't finished the translation,' she finally said, in lieu of nothing else springing into her mind.

The fry pan sizzled and Nancy threw a look over her shoulder. Both brows were raised, her nose wrinkled a little as she cocked her head to the side.

'I wasn't going to assume you had. Steve said you went to bed after he fell asleep.'

Nancy was... *pleasant*. Although Robin had tried not to make up an image in her mind of what Steve's ex-girlfriend was like, a part of her brain had decided she must have been somewhat mean, petty or catty, simply because of the nature of their breakup. As physically attractive as she was, Robin had mentally dug her heels in and convinced herself that Nancy's presence was an intrusion in their cheap little apartment.

The spatula scraped across the pan and Robin watched (if only so she didn't have to look at Nancy's face) as a plate of sausages, tomatoes and eggs was served up. Robin didn't even know they had tomatoes.

'Thank you,' Nancy said, apropos of nothing as she set the plate down in front of Robin. 'For taking the time to translate it. You must be busy with college.'

Grabbing a fork that seemed clean, Robin went to skewer the sausage. She didn't have a knife, but she could simply use the side to slice through it.

'It's fine,' Robin said, waving a hand. 'It's good practice.'

The urge to ask why this document was so important to be translated (and just where Nancy had found it) bubbled up on her tongue. Before she could ask, though, she recognised the jingle of Steve's key in the lock and the sound of the front door opening.

'Honey, I'm home!'

The familiar call had Robin actually meeting Nancy's surprised eyes. Robin shook her head; it was an old joke and one they both took part in.

Entering the kitchen, Steve brightened to see the two of them and quickly leant over to pluck the second sausage off Robin's plate. He took a bite of it, no doubt instantly scalding his mouth, and tossed a tote bag onto the counter. It landed with a telltale thump and even as she questioned Steve about where he'd been she knew he'd returned

with books.

'I thought you might want some help,' Steve said as Robin reached in and pulled out the first book. 'I dunno how much help they'll be, but it's the thought that counts, right?'

The book Robin drew out was a Russian dictionary, borrowed from the local library. Nancy also reached into the bag and pulled out what seemed to be a Russian atlas, plus a map of the local Boston area. As Nancy unfolded the map, Robin flicked through the dictionary. It was tough to tell from a glance if the dictionary would be helpful, but she was still grateful by Steve's consideration.

As she flicked through the dictionary, Steve continuing to pick at her breakfast, Robin cleared her throat.

'So,' she started. 'Are either of you going to tell me why you need this translated, or do I just get to play along and find out when I'm being interrogated by Russians again?'

She knew that the silence that descended didn't mean it would be good. But, Robin had to concede, she'd accepted that a long time ago. With a heavy sigh, she lightly smacked Steve's hand away from her plate and hunched over her plate. Steve knew she'd never back down from a challenge.

'Okay. Fine. Someone needs to keep you two out of trouble. Let me finish my breakfast first, though.'

Sliding the Russian dictionary a little closer, Robin took another bite of her meal and let the flavour melt upon her tongue as she tried to get her mind working. Maybe the translation would be easier in the light of day.

*

It wasn't. Robin had no idea why she thought it would be easier now that the sun was up and shining through the windows.

One thing she had on her side now, though, was she had a decent grasp on the language. Sure, she'd never say she was fluent (much to Steve's disagreement)

Sitting hunched over the coffee table in the living room, Robin slowly worked through it. Line by line, word by word, letter by letter. And, as the minutes turned into hours, the mystery in the documents began to unravel themselves to her. Even in the translation, the papers were all in code.

К старому черному коню

Продать идеальную цену

Найдите северный крест

От ведьм

Then, below it in English:

To the old black horse

Sell the perfect price

Find the northern cross

From witches

'I don't get it,' Steve announced when Robin slapped it on the coffee table that afternoon and fell back against the couch.

'The Salem witch trials?' Nancy suggested.

'I need to get some sunlight,' Robin said as she rubbed her eyes and stretched her back against the couch.

'Do you want some company?'

Nancy's question, however gently asked, had Robin's eyes flying open. She paused, let her gaze rest upon the roof, and then pushed herself up and off the couch. Steve had her translation in front of him and the map of Boston in front of him.

'I think better when I'm alone,' Robin said (and, thankfully, that wasn't a lie). 'I just need to get my legs moving. I'll be back soon.'

Although she was sure there would at least be some mild discussion

about her peculiar behaviour, Robin didn't let herself think about it. Some fresh air and sunlight would do her a world of good. And, if anything, she could at least try to get rid of the crick in her neck from being hunched over the table all morning. Steve was going to owe her a physiotherapy visit at this rate.

*

Her walk, in all its metaphorical glory, lasted for two days. Although Robin returned home to rest and eat and study and sleep, her mind continued on. Staring into space, she'd find herself still walking along the streets, surrounded by houses, trees, land and sky. She'd mentally escape the confines of the shitty apartment she and Steve lived in, drift past Smith College and down the interstate. On and on she went, as her fork tapped on the side of the plate or drummed her fingers along to the television jingles.

Waking up before class on the second day, it immediately hit Robin what the code could be. She lurched out of bed, one sock dangling off her foot and her pyjama bottoms hitched low, and headed immediately into the living room.

Steve, still asleep on the couch, snorted and grunted when Robin flopped down on the couch and pulled out the map of Boston. The early morning sunlight had begun to stream in and without so much as gently waking Steve up, she reached over and turned on the floor lamp. Steve awoke with a grunt, but Robin stoically ignored him as she traced her finger along the map. Beside it was the notepad where she'd written the Russian code time and time again.

To the old black horse

Sell the perfect price

There it was. Haymarket. The old open-air market, located partly on Blackstone Street.

Find the northern cross

Moving her finger north, Robin reached one of the major streets. Cross Street.

From witches

Robin tapped her finger on the map. Anything could be relating to witches. Salem, though, was miles away, and she was certain this had nothing to do with it.

'What's going on?' Steve asked from her behind her, his voice groggy with sleep.

'Shh!' Robin hissed.

Salem Street jumped out to her, a junction north-north-east of Haymarket. It was a long strip, cutting through Boston and up to the harbour. The reference there could mean anything along along that half-mile street.

But, there, near the tip was a landmark. Old North Church.

The northern cross from witches.

'I've got it,' Robin said, grabbing a pencil and circling the church.

'Hmm?' Steve was still struggling. He rubbed his eyes, threw his legs over the side of the couch, and tried to focus on the map. 'You bet your life on it?'

'No,' Robin said instantly. 'But it's more than what you were working with before.'

Steve gave a hacking cough as he cleared his throat, pushed his overgrown hair back, and offered Robin a thumbs up as he stood and wrapped his blanket back around him from where it had been kicked off.

'Cool. I'm making coffee.'

Despite his early-waking dismissive nature, Robin knew talking to Steve first thing in the morning was never a good idea. So she merely sat there, beaming to herself, and waited for the coffee to brew. She was right- she knew it.

It was decided quickly that they would drive to Boston. It would take five hours if they caught the Greyhound, and none of them were all that thrilled by that idea. Nancy, by virtue of having the cleanest record (and the most reliable car) would drive them the ninety minutes it would take them to get there. In turn, Robin and Steve would go halves in the cost of a motel.

'Let's get two rooms,' Steve suggested.

'Why?' Robin asked, her brows knitting together. 'It's cheaper for one. We can get two beds and ask for a cot. They do it all the time.'

As he zipped his overnight bag closed and accepted the sweater Robin was handing to him, Steve sucked at his teeth. He shrugged and waved a hand.

'I just don't think Nancy would want to share a room with me,' Steve said, sounding pained. Although they were standing in the privacy of his room while he packed, he still dropped his voice.

'What, and you think she'd prefer to be alone with *me*?' Robin asked incredulously.

'Yeah, sure. She's not bothered by you being... you know. So inclined.'

'So why- '

Steve held up a hand to stop her. He took a breath, held it, and then pointedly avoided making eye contact when he spoke.

'Maybe *I* don't want to share a room with *her*,' he said, before turning so he was side-on to Robin. 'Or you. It's been... a while since I've had me time.'

At first Robin didn't understand. She stared at him, watched him pull on the sweater, and then felt a rush of heat to her cheeks. Pivoting on the ball of her foot, she turned and hurried out. It didn't matter if that was the exact reason or not; Robin wasn't inclined to pry further for the truth. She could just have her own private *me-time* when they were back from the impromptu trip.

On the drive out to Boston, Nancy finally deigned to provide some backstory to their adventure. The hunt for the people responsible for the lab (American and Russian alike) had never ended, and the Byers family had realised the dangerous reach the respective organisations held. The plan at the moment, Nancy went on to explain, was to find the base of the greater Boston region.

All Robin heard was that, much like the last time, nobody had a damn idea what was going to happen.

'We're just going to go in and grab what we can. No one will know we're there,' Nancy said, with all the confidence of someone who had had far too many lucky breaks.

'Has anyone ever told the two of you that you're completely insane?' Robin asked, incredulous. She leant in between the two front seats where Nancy drove and Steve sat beside her, in charge of the music.

'Yes,' Nancy and Steve said in unison.

'We're going to die,' Robin mumbled as she slumped back into her seat.

She wasn't scared.

Okay, that was a lie. She was definitely a little scared, but it was at a healthy level. It was good to be concerned. Last time she'd gone along with a harebrained scheme she'd wound up with needing to buy new underpants.

They found a motel just outside of the city just as the sun set. True to his word, Steve got them two rooms with a joining door. Robin bit her tongue as she was passed their key and Steve went off to enjoy his solitude. If Nancy was at all perturbed by the turn of events, she at least had the decency to keep her mouth shut.

'Do you want a shower?' Nancy asked as soon they entered.

What Robin wanted right then was for the world to swallow her whole and eject back into her French 340 class and let herself get sucked into Montaigne and Graffigny. Flopping down on one of the twin beds and choosing to ignore just how clean (or unclean) the

bedding was, she waved a hand towards Nancy. She could feel Nancy's eyes upon her; without intending, Robin held her breath and waited. Nancy's gaze was steady, prolonged, a weight that she didn't quite know how to respond to.

'I'm having a shower,' she said when Robin failed to respond. 'We should go out to dinner after.'

Robin gave a grunt to say that she had heard and rolled onto her side. Moments later, after the bathroom door had clicked shut, the sound of the pipes rumbled through the room and the shower began to run.

It was only a few days. They'd be heading back home soon.

It didn't escape her that she'd been telling herself exactly that for a while now and Nancy had yet to leave.

*

The plan was discussed over dinner. Nancy didn't have much intel beyond there being a potential base in Boston and it being at or near the church. Robin wasn't overly enthused with that and she found herself rubbing her face as they sat on the floor of their shared hotel room with Steve, eating what they could rummage from the local corner store. Cheese and suspicious egg sandwiches sat in front of them, along with packets of chips and cans of Coke. The stomach ache that was developing could be from the lack of healthy food or concern for the following day.

'Sneaking around a church isn't a plan,' Robin said. 'I'm not even baptised.'

'Okay, you can stay in the car, then. Nancy and I will do the sneaking,' Steve replied, hurriedly trying to swallow so he didn't spit bread everywhere.

'Uh, no,' she shot back. 'You've had too many concussions. One more head injury and I'm sure you're allowed to claim disability benefits. You can be the driver.'

'Sweet. Can I pick the music?'

'Knock yourself out.'

The lack of a concrete plan still nagged at Robin, but as she traced the route they would take onto the map, she decided to trust the two of them. Sure, she felt like an absolute fool for doing so, but someone had to keep them in line. It may as well be her.

Night crept in and Steve returned to his room. Robin showered while Nancy cleaned the room of their meals. When it was Nancy's turn to shower, Robin changed into her pyjamas, slipped between the blankets on the bed, and waited with her eyes closed.

The bathroom door opened and Nancy's bare feet padded across the carpet. Even from where she lay, Robin could feel the steam from the bathroom and could smell the inoffensive, basil-rosemary scent of the motel-supplied soap. The lamp by the bed was switched off and the mattress beside her squeaked as Nancy climbed onto it. Tomorrow they'd be risking their lives again, for a cause so few people knew.

She waited.

She heard Nancy shift on her bed.

'Why aren't you at college?' she finally dared to ask.

The question hung in the night air. She could sense Nancy, somewhere to her left, hesitating over it. Robin held her breath, and wondered if she could pretend to be asleep.

'I didn't feel like I was doing anything useful,' Nancy finally replied. 'I didn't dropout, I've just deferred the year.'

'What were you studying?'

'Journalism. I thought if I could get stories out, then maybe I'd be able to help raise awareness. Push things ahead. But then I realised I'd always be under someone's thumb. I'd get the stories assigned to me, I'd do them, and it would be up to an editor to release them. If I went off and did my own thing, I'd still need someone else to sign off on them to put them to print. And if I went down an, I dunno, indie zine route, no one would ever take them seriously.'

'You could still write,' Robin replied, finally opening her eyes and looking towards Nancy's bed in the dark.

'I intend to. I just want to do something more directly helpful at the same time.'

'Like what?'

'I was thinking nursing,' Nancy said. There was something in her voice that made Robin think she was going to get laughed at. 'My mom thinks I should try becoming a doctor, but nursing seems more practical. Especially if there's a chance of needing to do things while on the road. Nurses are the ones who insert catheters.'

'That sounds like a good idea,' Robin said, as gently as possible to convey she was serious. 'It also won't take eight years, like medicine.'

'Exactly. So much can change in eight years.'

'What happened to you and Jonathan?'

The fourth question Robin had shot at her in a rapid space of time had Nancy stumbling again. She took longer this time to reply, and wound up clearing her throat a number of times. Maybe she was just buying herself some time to come with an answer.

'We... grew apart,' she finally said, with a greater caution than her discussion of her education plans. 'He moved away. It grew difficult to stay in contact. We went to college in different states, but by that point it was like we'd already broken up. It was a bit of a relief. I was able to find myself. What I wanted to do... who I wanted to be. I could explore.'

'Oh.'

'I bet you must have found that, too, in college. Do you like Smith?'

'It's fine,' Robin said, because it was.

'What's been your favourite thing? Are you seeing anyone?'

It was Robin's turn to become quiet. She would have been jealous, if

she hadn't already resigned herself to being *that* girl in college. Dateless, weird, a nerd, even now. She hadn't even had an opportunity to break up with someone.

'Are you okay, Robin?'

Nancy's gentle voice stirred her. Rolling onto her back, Robin pulled the blankets up to her chin and turned to her side.

'We should get some sleep before tomorrow. I don't trust Steve with directions.'

Nancy didn't reply. That was a relief.

*

Steve drove them, as they had decided. Robin sat in the back seat, an elbow propped up on the ledge and her chin sitting upon her hand. She watched the world go by, the idle chatter between Steve and Nancy washing over her. She envied them. That ease between them, soothed by time. There were no fraught words, no tenseness from their long-ended relationship. Robin had half an urge to wedge herself between them and force them to reveal just how that could happen.

'What happens if we get caught?' she said instead. 'We need a way out. We didn't discuss that last night.'

The conversation in front of her paused and she could feel Nancy's eyes upon her. Steve, at least, kept focusing on the road.

'We'll be fine,' Nancy said.

'How can you be sure?'

'We'll be fine.'

The certainty in her voice had Robin daring to slide her eyes towards her, dubious and incredulous. She wouldn't dispute her, not when she and Steve had been doing this for longer than her, but Robin still felt like she was the most responsible in the car.

'If I die because of this,' she said evenly, 'I'm going to come back and haunt you both.'

'God, please, do,' Steve finally said. 'I don't know how to do my taxes.'

'Nobody does,' Nancy replied. 'I'm pretty sure my dad still asks mom to do them, even after the divorce.'

Robin went back to looking out the window and smiled. Maybe the conversation was easier to slip into than she thought.

The roads became more congested and pedestrians lined the pavement. Leaning over between the front seats, she draped an arm on the driver's seat and pointed up ahead. Although she'd only been to Boston twice before, she had memorised the map as best she could. The memory in her mind was hazy from the thirty-second taxi ride she had taken through this strip, but it was becoming clearer as they drove closer.

'There's Haymarket,' she said. 'Steve, you're going to want to take the next left. Hanover.'

'It's creepy how you do that.'

'Do what? Memorise street names?'

Steve made a strangling sound that meant yes.

'I've got the map open in front of me, it's not like I've *memorised* it.'

Robin hurriedly pulled out the folded map and pretended like it had been open the whole while; as she did, she heard the sound of stifled laughter. Lifting her eyes, she saw Nancy looking over her shoulder, a hand pressed to her lips as she watched her. Despite herself, Robin felt her cheeks flush and she lifted the map to hide her face. It wouldn't do her any good to get distracted now.

'Drop us off halfway up the road, I'll tell you when. We can walk the rest of the way,' she said, hoping her voice sounded even. 'We don't want them spotting the car.'

'So where should I pick you up?'

Good question. They'd discussed that the night before, but seeing the city in the twilight dusk made it all a little more difficult.

Steve pulled up behind an old, darkened building halfway up the road. Robin was quick to get out of the car first, while Nancy gave some final directions to Steve as she shrugged her backpack high onto her shoulder. He was to wait until it was twenty past the hour, then drive up to the church. They'd meet him there and they could speed off. Robin didn't like the sound of this plan at all, but they'd also entered a Russian base with no other thought than 'sounded fun'. Sometimes she seriously questioned her taste in friends.

The pavement was only illuminated on one side of the road, and she and Nancy chose to walk under the creeping cover of darkness. A few people idled about, most giving them the same wide berth they did. Robin had no idea if any of them were Russian or shadowy government types, or if they were all going about their own sinister business. It was difficult to say whether she wished she was at home, working on an assignment, or if she was genuinely glad for the excitement. Mostly she'd be grateful if Steve didn't leave this with another head wound.

'So what do you plan to do with...' Robin waved a hand. 'Whatever we find?'

'Bring it back,' Nancy replied. 'Add it to the collection.'

'You have a collection?'

Nancy nodded.

They spoke quietly, in half-sentences and inferences, as they headed up to the church. It loomed at the end of Salem Street, they steeple pointing up above the brick-lined buildings. Robin would have liked to have come here during the day. Maybe she would, when all this was over. Explore this rabbit warren of old buildings, brush up against the brick walls and imagine a life where she could simply enjoy the historical architecture.

The street was lined with tiny cafes and bars, boutique shops and schools, all hidden by dark shadows. Even the bars were closed,

though Robin couldn't tell if that was because of the time of day or if they were more along the lines of something like a speakeasy, where you only knew the opening hours by secret code. She had a fake ID, but she hadn't dared to use it yet- not that she was cool enough to get into a secret bar like a speakeasy.

'Hey,' Nancy whispered, her elbow jamming into Robin's side. 'Is this it?'

The church was easy to miss. It blended so well into the rest of the street, only a thin black fence separating it from the rest of the path. Robin and Nancy shared a look and continued walking, only slowing a fraction to take in the sight of it. No lights were on in the church, nor any of the surrounding buildings.

'Is there... I dunno, a parsonage?' Nancy asked, mostly to herself.

'A parsonage?'

'Y'know, where priests sleep.'

Robin shook her head. 'I told you, I've never been to church.'

'Let's just look.'

The gate was locked and they needed to climb over the fence. Robin went first, heaving herself up and balancing precariously at the top to avoid the sharpened pickets. Landing deftly on the other side, she reached between the posts to offer Nancy a boost up.

'I can climb up,' Nancy protested.

'You're short. Just do it.'

With a sigh, Nancy pulled her backpack off and tossed it over the fence. Robin caught it, set it down beside her, then offered her hands back out through the posts to heave her up.

As Nancy clambered up the fence, Robin did wonder to herself why a church such as this had such a high fence. It was maybe no taller than six feet, but she couldn't recall any churches in Hawkins having one so high- if they had a fence at all. Maybe it was a city thing, but

it seemed unlikely.

When Nancy leapt down beside her, it occurred to Robin it was quiet. There were noises off in the distance, meaning it wasn't completely silent, but it was far quieter than she expected. Raising a finger to her lips, the light from the pavement giving just enough illumination for them to see each other, Robin jerked her head towards the church. Something about it was calling to her.

'You better know where we're going,' Nancy hissed at her as she shouldered her backpack again and they approached the cavernous wooden door.

'*Me?* This is your mission.'

'Yeah, but you decoded the riddle.'

'The riddle *you* gave to *me*.'

'Because you know Russian!'

'*Shh*.'

They were getting too loud and someone might hear. Bickering in English or Russian was still bickering.

The first door they approached was locked. Robin tried it twice and both times felt the lock catch before she could even pretend it would open. Beside her, Nancy had pulled out a tiny flashlight. The beam of light shone at the door before she gave a quick sweep of their surroundings.

'This way,' she whispered. 'There's got to be another door.'

Making their way around the side of the church, Nancy took the lead while Robin followed from behind, watching over her shoulder. She really should have brought something to defend herself with, and it was beginning to eat at her.

The side of the church they went down came up empty for second entrances, as did the back of the church. However, when they started back up the final side, Nancy came across another door. She gestured

for Robin to come closer as she laid her hand upon the handle and turned.

It opened with a creak. The two shared a look, and Nancy peered inside. It was dim, and as the pair stepped inside, Robin noted that it was far less dusty than she had anticipated. The church, as far as she was aware, was still in operation, though she wouldn't be able to name the area they were in. However, as Nancy moved towards the archway to the atrium, the flashlight sweeping the walls, Robin grabbed her by the arm and pointed in the far corner.

'Look,' she hissed.

There was a door. It was partly hidden by a bookshelf, which had been pulled away from the wall. It would just allow enough space for the door to open and an individual to squeeze through. Robin and Nancy shared a look in the eerie light of the flashlight and nodded at one another. They knew that was where they needed to go without even considering it.

Once again, Nancy took the lead. Although Robin wasn't quite sure why she was, she decided to not argue about it. This was Nancy's adventure and Robin was only along for the ride.

The door opened to a staircase that went down. It was difficult to see and the flashlight only provided so much illumination. There was a handrail, which proved to be a small mercy, as Robin uncertainly followed closely behind. The air grew chilled, the stone walls sucking away any semblance of warmth, and she wished suddenly she'd brought another jacket or scarf.

At the bottom of the stairs, Nancy swung the flashlight up and down the corridor. The light didn't reach far enough to show what lay at the end, but what it did show wasn't informative. Cobweb-riddled crevices and dust that clung to whatever edge there might be. Reaching out in the dark, Robin groped around until she found Nancy's wrist and held on. She wasn't about to chicken out and insist they leave, not when there was something to be found down here, but her common sense was telling her that would be a good idea.

'Which way?' Nancy whispered.

'The code said north. So...' Turning about in the dark, her fingers still wrapped around Nancy's wrist, Robin thought for a moment and pointed right. 'This way.'

It was difficult to stay quiet in the concrete labyrinth. Their shoes scuffed along the dusty floor, even with the rubber soles of their sneakers, and their breath seemed to echo down the tunnels. Robin swore she could even hear the swish of their jeans and jackets, neither which seemed to keep the nipping cold from seeping in.

Worst of all, she had a sense of dread of where they actually were.

Although Nancy's flashlight didn't linger for long, Robin kept catching sight of large metal plates that they were passing by. There seemed to be etchings on some, though it was difficult to make out while they were walking. After a moment, she laid her fingers upon Nancy's wrist to slow her.

'I think...'

She approached one of the walls and ran her fingers over the edge of one of the plates.

of the Rev. Dr. Walter

deceased viz.

LYNDE WALTER-

'I think we're in a crypt,' Robin finished softly.

'A crypt?' Nancy sounded aghast, appalled. Robin couldn't blame her.

'Let's just find what you're looking for and get out of here.'

The good news, Robin realised, is that there were very few doors that they needed to investigate. While a part of her did want to jimmy open one of the sealed crypt doors and investigate the skeletons within, she certainly didn't want to do that while this basement could potentially be crawling with Russians who wanted to interrogate them.

As they neared the end of the corridor where it deviated into a T-junction, Nancy's flashlight finally swept across a wooden door that didn't seem to harbour the remains of dead clergy. She elbowed Robin in the ribs and nodded towards it. The relief was palpable as Robin hurried towards it. She wanted to simply get in and out.

The door opened with a worrying creak. Robin glanced over her shoulder as Nancy went inside, only to be met with darkness. Following her, she shut the door behind them and glanced around the dusty room.

It wasn't big enough to be called an office, though it did contain a simple wooden table and an old office chair with a peeling leatherette seat. Paper was scattered across the tabletop, and a shelving unit behind it that promised more intel than Nancy had dreamed over. Robin headed over to it but wasn't at all surprised to find it locked when she tried to open the top drawer.

'Can you read this?' Nancy asked as she thrust a piece of paper under her face.

'Uh- '

Taking the page, Robin tried to read it as Nancy held the flashlight up for her to see.

Her eyes skimmed the page. It seemed to be some type of construction detail, though her Russian wasn't nearly good enough to translate the more complicated terminology. However, as she read the typed dossier, her eyes caught a repeated word that could only be translated as one thing.

'Хоукинс,' she said. Then, at Nancy's confused expression, 'uh- it's a close translation of Hawkins. Russian doesn't really have a straight *H* sound, so- *Kh*. Khokins. Hawkins.'

'It's useful?'

'Maybe? It seems to be about them building something. I'd need some time to read it. Grab everything.'

Nancy didn't need to be told twice. She threw the backpack off her

shoulder, dropped it onto the distressed chair and began shovelling the paper inside.

It was possibly only Robin's anxiety spiking, but she swore she could hear something outside the closed door. Leaving Nancy to gather what she could, Robin approached the door, straining to hear what it could be. Her heart was pounding hard, and the rush of blood went through her ears. It sounded like shoes on the ground, that tell-tale scuff of someone walking. Holding her breath, Robin leaned closer to the door until her ear was pressed against it.

Keep walking, she mouthed silently. *Keep walking*.

They were getting closer. Maybe they'd walk past. They'd have to walk past. There was nothing of interest for them in this room, nothing to draw them in. There weren't two people in here, rummaging about for what they could find.

The flashlight swept over her from behind. Robin spun around and gestured wildly for Nancy to turn it off.

The door handle twisted.

Before Robin could react, the door opened suddenly and smacked her in the face. Stumbling backwards, pain shooting like electricity up her cheek, she fell against the desk. The man who entered seemed momentarily stunned himself, until his much larger flashlight filled the office with a streak of yellow light.

As a sharp wash of pain bloomed from Robin's hip and up her back, she heard the man cry out. It was Russian, but she couldn't immediately reply. Her only thought was that she needed to get Nancy out before anything else happened.

'Шпионы!'

Spies.

Robin pushed herself up and tried to figure out what was happening. The flashlight in her face temporarily blinded her as she spat out 'Her!' quickly in an attempt to slow down whatever was happening.

It worked, all for two seconds, before Nancy suddenly said '*shit*' in a clear American accent.

Well, great.

'Americans!'

Russian wasn't needed to understand that.

The man, dressed in a simple olive green uniform, turned his light to Nancy. The two stared at each other across the table. It provided Robin with just enough time to lurch up and barrel towards him. Her shoulder connected with his chest as she forced him back towards the door. She had no plan beyond getting him away from them. Her quick thinking only went so far. At least, she reasoned, she was thinking of Nancy and not just herself.

Her strength, though, only went so far. The man let out a loud *oof*, but remained upright. As he righted up, stalled for not nearly as long as Robin had hoped, he turned and snarled at Robin. The flashlight he held was raised, and it dawned on her what was about to happen. Covering her face with her arms, Robin had a thought at the very last minute to not grit her teeth. The side of the flashlight struck the side of her head, connecting with her wrist. Staggering several steps to the left, another smack of the flashlight came down on her head. Her arms slid slightly and the lip of the glass slashed across her nose.

Lights dazzled her eyes, partly from pain and partly from the flashlight. Something hot hit her hands but Robin barely noticed it as she lurched forward. She kicked out, her heel connecting with the man's knee. It was enough to put space between them as she kicked again, higher this time; it didn't quite connect with his groin, but it was close enough for him to move back.

This was why they needed something to defend themselves with. All Robin had was a sad looking office chair and her sneakers.

That was the last thought she had as a loud crack filled the tiny concrete room. The sound was explosive and Robin found herself on her knees, hands covering her ears, immediately moving into a defensive posture. She only looked up when Nancy grabbed the back

of her shirt and hauled her up.

She was saying something. Robin knew Nancy was saying something, but she couldn't hear. There was a ringing in her ears and the world was swimming.

She had a gun. Nancy had a gun. That seemed like an Aerosmith song. Nancy's got a gun, dum-dum-dum-dum-dum.

That had to be what she'd been hauling around in her backpack.

'Are you okay?'

Nancy sounded like she was speaking underwater. Robin shut her eyes, tried to shake her head, and decided that wasn't a good idea.

She looked down.

The Russian man was screaming. Nancy had shot him in the knee. Blood was pooling out from under him. It didn't look lethal, but it did look serious.

Crouching down, Robin grabbed the flashlight that had rolled away from him and turned it back on.

'Let's run.'

At least she could talk.

Better yet, she could attempt to run.

It was by no means elegant. Pain still coursed through her, hot and throbbing, and her hearing was still murky and muddled. But her legs could move of their own accord. Nancy had grabbed her hand and tugged her along. Robin's confiscated flashlight illuminated the way. She didn't know when Nancy's smaller one had gone, but she didn't have the capacity to think that far.

There were people behind them. She didn't need to hear anything to know that. She could sense them, tearing up from the end of the corridor. Robin forced her legs to move faster, even as her head throbbed and something wet dripped down her face.

The staircase loomed in front of them. Reaching it was a small mercy, and though she stumbled over a number of the steps, she forced herself up. Higher and higher, another step closer to freedom.

Nancy heaved the top door open and Robin rushed through it. Neither spared the door another thought except to close it.

Out they ran, out the church and into the cold night air. The fence they had jumped over was only a dozen paces away, but it felt miles as Robin sprinted. Nancy already had the backpack off and was heaving it over the fence when Robin grabbed her. Without thinking, Robin shoved her up, forcing to clamber up the fence before she was even ready.

'Jesus, I'm not- '

'Stop complaining!'

'Okay, shit, goddamn, okay- '

'We're at a church, mind your language.'

'What *happened*?'

Steve was there.

Robin hadn't even seen his car until she'd landed on the other side of the fence.

He stared at the two of them from where he sat, his window down. Robin lurched to the vehicle, threw the back door open and fell inside. Nancy landed on her legs. She was faintly aware of the door shutting, the car starting, and the church being left behind.

'Are you okay?' Steve asked, the panic evident in his voice.

Robin had never been more glad to receive a head injury; she really didn't want to deal with the fallout of Steve having another concussion.

Robin did her best not to flinch as Nancy swiped the damp tissue across her upper lip. Her eyes were fixed on the upper corner of the room, predominately to avoid watching Nancy. She could feel the intensity of her gaze on her, the closeness. Nancy's cool, slim fingers touched her face, turning it this way and that as she cleaned the blood off of her.

The second reason for Robin fixing her gaze upon the ceiling was to avoid wincing when Nancy touched a tender spot. She hadn't quite split her lip, though it was definitely swelling up and turning purple. Nor did it seem like her nose had been broken, though Nancy still seemed unimpressed with damage.

'You're going to be sore tomorrow.'

'I'm sore *now*.'

'Just keep icing it throughout the day. You're going to bruise.'

'Understood, Nurse Nancy.'

There was a twitch from the corner of Nancy's lips as she sat back. The fingers that had been gently pressed on Robin's cheek and chin withdrew. Robin found herself immediately missing their touch.

It was some small comfort to know she wouldn't be having to explain the bruising this time to her parents. She wasn't sure what her folks had thought when she came home that night, all those years ago, bruised and bleeding and still a little giddy from it all. The destruction of the mall only explained so much.

'Does your jaw hurt?' Nancy asked.

Robin clenched her teeth and shrugged. 'I'll avoid carrots and tough steak for the next few days, but none of my teeth are loose.'

As Nancy went to clean up in the bathroom, Robin grabbed the box of tissues that had been beside them, pushed up from off the floor and went to flop on her bed. The box of tissues landed beside her, pressed up against the pillows. She shut her eyes and listened to the sound of running water, the bathroom light being turned off, and Nancy padding out of the bathroom.

The drive back to the motel had been uneventful. Although Robin was surprised they hadn't been tailed in the extra long route Steve had taken back to their overnight quarters. Everything ached, but unlike the last time she'd been captured by the Russians, it felt like a reminder she was alive. She'd be hating herself in the morning, but for now she could press her fingers into the bruises on her hip and poke at the swollen lump on her cheek. It was a reminder that she had escaped again.

'Stop touching it,' Nancy said when she returned. 'You'll only aggravate it.'

'Maybe I want to aggravate it. It'll give me a cool story to tell in class.'

'You won't impress any girls. They'll only think you're scary.' As Nancy spoke, she headed swiftly over to Robin and caught her wrist to pry her hand away.

'Oh, how can you be so sure?' Robin shot at her, before she stopped and dared to look at Nancy. Then, quieter, 'how do you- how did you know...?'

She hadn't told Nancy about her predilection. And, she was pretty damn sure, Steve hadn't, either. They'd been best friends for years and he'd never let it slip once. Finding out he'd finally spilled her secret would have been more shocking than discovering Nancy knew.

It seemed as though she had stunned Nancy into silence, too. She pulled back, dropped her hand awkwardly, then glanced away.

'Oh... I just- I just... I guessed.'

'I'm not... is it that obvious?' Robin asked as she sat up. 'Do I radiate, like... *that* energy?'

'No. Not really,' Nancy mumbled, tucking her hair behind her ear. 'I just... it's... you remind me of some people I went to college with.'

'Like who?'

There was a beat.

'Like me,' Nancy admitted, far more quietly than Robin expected.

'What?'

Robin felt like she'd missed something. Maybe she'd been concussed. She ought to ask Steve in the morning.

Swallowing hard, she touched the side of her cheek where a bruise was developing only for Nancy to lightly smack her hand away. She let her hand drop to the bed, then glanced down to where Nancy was awkwardly twisting her finger around the hem of her shirt.

'But... you're not... I mean... you dated Jonathan and Steve.'

'Yeah.'

'Are you...' Robin started, only to drift off. She couldn't even bring herself to articulate it.

'I don't know,' Nancy admitted with a shrug. 'I still like guys. I think. I... started thinking about it around the time I started thinking journalism wasn't for me. So... I tried a little with girls. And it was nice. I mean, I didn't find myself put off like I thought I would be. It felt good, like with guys. You know what I'm talking about, right? Like... you just know when something is right.'

Eyeballing Nancy, Robin was quiet for a long moment and then shook her head. A slight V formed between Nancy's brows and a confused expression crossed her features.

'I- I've never... I mean, I've kissed girls, so I get where you're coming from. But...' Robin had only ever talked about this with Steve. Any other time she'd mentioned anything to anyone else, she'd avoided mentioning the gender of the person involved. 'I've never- it's been... I'm not really good when it comes to picking up, uh, someone's *energy*, you get me?

'But... you're so...' Nancy stumbled for a moment, before blurting out, '*smart*. Attractive. You have freckles.'

'What do freckles have anything to do with it?'

It was only then that Robin released Nancy was blushing and avoiding eye contact as much as she was. Her fingers were still twisting at her shirt, which would inevitably stretch the cotton until it was distorted and out of shape. Reaching out, Robin pressed her hand over Nancy's to stop it, an impulse she couldn't control. Her hand covered Nancy's cool fingers as she squeezed.

There was a silence that stretched between them, but it wasn't uncomfortable. Robin found her mind was spinning as she tried to fathom what Nancy had just told her.

'You're really smart, Robin,' Nancy stated. 'Like... Steve had told me you were clever, but I didn't really get it until I came up here. But... you seriously haven't met anyone? Smith is meant to be a women's college.'

'Yeah. That doesn't mean it's a *women* women's college.'

'But you're funny and smart and- and you have freckles.'

'What do freckles have anything to do with it?'

Nancy kissed her. Robin remained still for a moment, feeling the press of lips against her own, before a part of her brain told her to respond.

She'd kissed a few girls at college, but it had always been at drunken parties. The girls (women, really) would squeal and laugh and Robin, pretending to be equally inebriated, would laugh and pretend to respond in kind. It had been awkward and stilted on her end as she knew none of it meant anything, and she'd squeezed whatever she had in her hand at the time. A napkin, a red solo cup, a bottle of beer that had only been sipped. And then she'd pull away and laugh and wipe her mouth and try to find the nearest exit.

This was different.

Her heart skipped a beat as she cautiously parted her lips and felt the sweep of a tongue against her own. Drawing in a breath, Robin lifted her hand from Nancy's cool fingers and placed it carefully, gently, upon her shoulder. She leant in closer, all to draw her in deeper, at

the same time Nancy did. Without expecting it, she felt their teeth knock and their noses crush together. Pain shot through her face and Robin jerked back, covering her bruised, swollen skin instinctively as she swore loudly.

'Oh- oh God, oh geez, are you- '

Covering her nose with her hand, Robin looked down at the large, fat drops of crimson blood splashed on her palm.

'Ah, shit,' Robin swore, sniffing instinctively.

'Hold still.'

The box of tissues were pulled out from under the pillow and landed by her knee. Nancy pulled out a handful, shoved them in Robin's hand to soak up the blood and went about dabbing at her nose. Looking up, Robin held her breath as she felt those cool fingers along her chin and cheek again, checking for any further damage.

'Are you okay?' Nancy asked.

'Yeah, yeah, I'm fine- '

'I didn't mean to hurt you.'

'You didn't, I'm fine.'

'Seriously, I'm sorry.'

It was Robin's turn to kiss her. With the balled up tissues in her hand, she cupped Nancy's cheek and kissed her, this time making sure to avoid pressing her nose too hard. This wasn't like the awkward, quasi-drunken kisses she'd experienced in college, nor the awkward, furtive kisses she'd had in high school, when she'd made some desperate, last-ditch effort attempts to find some attraction to guys. The kisses now were deep, needy, an opportunity to drink in all she'd lost.

Maybe later she'd regret not stemming the flow of blood from her nose, but she was less concerned about that than her ability to breathe. Each breathe came as a gasp as she held Nancy close.

Everything felt like a rush. She fell back against the pillows and tugged Nancy towards her, craving her, hungering to feel her.

Nancy, thankfully, went willingly. She crawled atop Robin, lithe and careful, avoiding her bruises and tender spots as best she could.

The feeling of someone on her- of a woman, of *Nancy*- was a rush. Scarcely able to believe it, Robin leant back against the pillows and arched her back. Her hands hovered a moment, still dancing atop her shoulders, before she let them drop to Nancy's back. They slid down, over the jut of her shoulder blades and the flare of her ribs. Her fingers dug into the material of Nancy's shirt, clawing at it until Nancy sat upright.

'What- '

In a swift motion, far too quick for Robin to even realise what was happening, Nancy knelt above her and hauled her shirt over head.

Maybe it was rude to stare, but Robin was unable to help it. Here she was, in a bed, alive after escaping Russians for a second time, with Nancy on top of her with her shirt off. Now was the best time to stare. With wide eyes, Robin took a breath, held it, and finally dared to drink in the sight of Nancy in her bra. Although she knew it really wasn't all that different from, say, going for a swim with her friends at the local pool and seeing them in their swimsuits, it still felt different. This wasn't nylon and Lycra. This was lace and ribbons. This was different.

'Sit up,' Nancy directed.

It didn't take Robin more than a second to realise what she was being asked. Swallowing hard, she grabbed the hem of her shirt that still had a few drops of blood on it and hauled it over her head. She almost immediately regretted it, though, as pain shot down her ribs.

It didn't matter. She'd forget about it as soon as Nancy pressed their bare skin together. Every touch and skin and brush of skin had Robin's mind alight as she attempted to commit it all to memory. One hand splayed over the back of Nancy's bra, pressing against the clasp, as another ran up and pulled the hair tie free from her hair. She

carded her fingers through Nancy's soft curls, all in an attempt to touch more of her.

It didn't occur to Robin that her first time could be about to happen. She'd never really considered the *how* it would occur, or even the *why*. Just that she'd been waiting and had hungered for it. Maybe it was unusual to be doing this after what they'd done that evening, but it was also a reminder of just how alive she was.

Reaching between them, Robin found the thick button of her jeans and the zipper that always tended to get caught when going up and fumbled with them. It seemed at first thought Nancy was about to stop her, but she soon went and shoved at her own jeans. Peeling them off, she kicked her legs when Nancy rolled off from on top and landed beside her on the small bed.

'I can't believe that this- that you- '

'Do you want to?' Nancy asked.

'Yes.'

Robin didn't need to be asked twice.

Their jeans were peeled off and Robin kicked hers off the bed. As they landed heavily on the floor, she reached over and hauled Nancy back on top of her. Although her hips hurt from where she'd hit the table, she was more than able to ignore it by the feeling of bare skin, soft and warm and all over her.

'Touch me,' she whispered, pawing at Nancy. 'Please.'

Although she wanted to touch Nancy in kind, Robin hungered to feel someone else upon her. There had been countless nights where she had run her hands over herself, explored her body, learnt it until she knew it perfectly. But she'd never had someone else on her, and she ached to feel someone else's hands.

Nancy was quick to agree. Laying beside her, cramped on the small bed, she coasted a hand over her shoulders. She slipped one bra strap down Robin's shoulder, letting it drop down her arm. Her palm smoothed out and ran over the cotton of her bra. Closing her eyes,

Robin forced her breathing to even out, even as her heart raced. She could feel her pulse in her head, the swelling on her cheek a dull reminder of what had happened earlier.

'Up,' Nancy whispered in her ear.

Arching her back, Robin arched her back as Nancy's hands fanned her ribs and followed her bra around. Her slim, deft fingers loosened the clasp. A full-bodied blush crept down Robin's cheeks to her neck and chest, and she found herself opening her eyes to watch as her bra was slipped off. Nancy, with her head bowed, kissed Robin's collar bones, her sternum, down between the valley of her breasts until she made her way over and began to press her lips closer to her nipple.

With a small, startled 'oh!', Robin dropped to her elbows and sagged back down. Her head fell back as Nancy's warm mouth wrapped around her nipple, sucking at it and letting her teeth tease the sensitive skin. It occurred to her, in the distant part of her mind, that she ought to be reciprocating in kind some way. She'd been friends with enough girls who had dragged their boyfriends, bemoaned their lack of interest in giving them a good time, and Robin had sympathised and made noises like she knew what they were talking about. And, now that she was in bed with someone, she didn't want to be like *them*. But she found herself unable to think much further than what was immediately happening; how Nancy was pinching her nipple, how she was sucking the skin on the side of her breast hard enough to leave a bruise, how her knee was in just the right position that, if Robin canted her hips down, she might be able to grind against it.

'Please,' she found herself saying. 'Can I just- I'd like to- '

At least she was using her manners. Maybe her mother would be proud.

Lifting her hands up, she grabbed at Nancy's bra. After she groped about a little, she found the clasp. Often she'd laughed at the idea of guys having absolutely no ability to undo one. It was a bra, it was a simple hook-and-eye clasp, there was nothing difficult about it. But, as she closed an eye and tried to slide the hook free, she realised she had no idea how to take it off.

'Here. Leave it for me,' Nancy said, laughing at Robin's clumsiness.

She reached behind and removed it with ease. Her bra, lace and ribbons and everything Robin had always fantasised about, slid off. She tossed it aside as Robin stared, unable to stop herself from reaching up and cupping them. Even as her mind spiralled, her hands knew what to do as she ran her thumbs over Nancy's dark nipples, trying to mimic what she did to herself in the privacy of her dark bedroom.

'Stay still,' Nancy directed.

'But I want- '

Cool fingers wrapped around her wrists and Robin found herself pinned to the bed. She hadn't known Nancy could be so strong. Looking up at her, finding a wide, wry grin on Nancy's face, Robin gave a small laugh.

'You deserve this. I'm going to treat you.'

Robin laughed again. She couldn't help it. She pretended to struggle a little against Nancy's wrists as she felt soft lips down her sternum again. The went lower, towards her navel and hips, and as it dawned on her what was about to happen, she felt the grip on her wrists lift and Nancy's short nails scratch along the edge of her panties.

She was naked. That felt like it should have been a bigger revelation than it really was. The night air was cool and prickled her skin, and the bedsheets were unfamiliar to her own and somewhere in the distance she could hear music from one of the other rooms. All of that swirled around her mind as she felt the tickle of Nancy's hair against her thighs and the puff of her hot breathe, but none of it, absolutely none of it, seemed to matter when she felt the first swipe of her tongue against her cunt.

Swearing under her breath, Robin grabbed at the sheets. One foot slid along the edge of the bed, while the other pushed into Nancy's bony shoulder. For years she had waited for this, and now that it was happening she had no idea what to focus on.

All of it. That was what she wanted. All of it.

Nancy continued to lap at her, swiping against her. It was intense. Robin had thought about this, over and over again, but she hadn't quite known what to expect. The tickle of hair against her inner thighs, the press of nails against her skin, the faintest graze of teeth against her as Nancy sucked at her clit. She could feel fingers pressing inside of her- one, two or three, Robin wasn't in a state to tell- and the pressure of a thumb against her clit.

'Oh- oh, God- please, don't stop, *Jesus-* '

Although Nancy hadn't told her just how many times she'd quote/unquote '*explored*' in college, Robin had a feeling it hadn't been just once. There was an ease to which Nancy lapped at her, which Robin didn't think would occur if this were only her second or third time. It wasn't as though she had any experience herself of which to compare, but she'd be willing to stake some money on it. But, if she were to be honest with herself, she was glad that was the case; Nancy knew how to curl her fingers inside her, how to drag each moan and sigh from her.

The heat, low in her belly to start with, had begun to fill her. Robin lifted her hips higher as she pressed her cunt against Nancy's face. One hand delved into Nancy's hair, pulling at the blonde-brown curls, while the other stretched up, found the pillow her head laid upon, and squeezed it. Nancy hooked a leg over her shoulder, her nails scratching down the length of her leg.

'Oh- *Christ-* '

Her orgasm was a surprise. The pillow underneath her was squeeze, Nancy's hair was tugged, and Robin felt her voice crack when she cried out. She'd known her body before, but it hadn't ever been like this. The world went white, fire raged through her, and something in the back of her mind told her that her nose was bleeding again.

Not that she was in much of a state to deal with it right then.

She was distantly aware of Nancy still between her legs, though her motions slowed.

Her breathing was raspy. The sound of her rapid heartbeat filled her ears. She was sure she was going to float away.

'You okay there, Robin?'

Robin could only whimper at Nancy's question.

'You sure?'

With a shaky nod, she felt Nancy's fingers slip free from her. There were kisses against her thigh and hips. She ought to reciprocate. That thought smacked about her head again, but she couldn't find the strength to give it any thought. All she had the ability to do was let go of Nancy's hair, drop both arms to the bed, and let her leg flop down.

Nancy kissed her. There was a hand to the back of her head, lifting it up. A tissue was under her nose.

'You're bleeding.'

'Oh.'

'Are you in pain?'

'Hm. No.'

'I guess that could happen.'

Keeping the tissues under her nose, Robin looked up through her lashes at Nancy. She'd just had sex. Kind of. She'd just been eaten out. Sure, she hadn't done anything really for Nancy, but she'd just had someone go down on her, and now she had a nosebleed.

It was awesome.

Sitting up a little, Robin continued to hold the bundle of tissues and forced her breathing to slow. She was fine. She was more than fine.

'I think I need a shower,' she said, still breathless.

Beside her, tucked onto her side, Nancy laughed and nodded. Robin

continued to stare at the wall in front of her, eyes unfocused. She felt good. Sure, her head hurt a little, and the bruise on her hip had begun to bloom down her leg, and yeah, her back was definitely beginning to pinch, but overall she felt *good*.

Almost.

'I don't think this bed is big enough for two people,' she said, turning to Nancy as she pressed the tissues a little firmer against her nose. 'No offence. I'm already going to wake up sore, I just... don't want to risk it.'

Although she could have definitely phrased that a little more delicately, Robin was pleased to see Nancy smile and roll off.

'You need a shower to soothe those tight muscles of yours. C'mon, I'll get the hot water running for you.'

While some people might have longed to spend the night curled up beside the person they'd lost their virginity to, Robin felt she had had something better. Understanding.

*

Nancy left for New York the day after they returned to the small apartment. She didn't give much information as to what she was doing there, only that she'd be paying a visit to Jonathan and Max who both lived in the city. Steve and Robin both understood innately that it was safer for everyone involved if they had minimal information, in case someone were to get caught.

A forwarding address in Chicago was given to them for when Robin finished decoding and translating the paperwork they had found. Not all of it was bound to be useful, but something to work with was better than nothing. Robin wasn't told who the address went to, but was assured they were 'on their side'. She believed Nancy. There was no reason not to.

They shared little more than a hug at Nancy's departure. Although Robin did get her ass pinched when Steve had his back turned to grab Nancy's suitcase, she at least managed to stifle a squeal.

The days passed. The bruising on her cheek, nose, hip and legs bloomed, turned black, then purple, green and yellow. Most of her classmates stared. Some asked questions. One girl, Robin thought, might have even flirted with her.

'I can see your freckles through that one,' she said before their French literature class.

Robin wasn't sure if she was grateful that the bruise hid most of her blush.

Maybe it was just a coincidence. Maybe she just wanted to be her friend.

Friday came. Steve made a pasta salad, Robin fried up some potatoes and together they sat down behind the coffee table and worked on the Russian papers Nancy had left behind. Although Steve still couldn't understand a lick of Russian, he at least knew how to pick out patterns. They ate quietly, with music drifting through the walls of the apartment next door.

Robin took a bite of the pasta, swallowed, and turned to another page.

'Nancy and I slept together.'

'What?' Steve asked, lifting his head. Then, 'when?'

'In Boston.'

Steve stared. Blinked. Stared. Looked down at his pasta salad. Robin turned back to the original page she'd been reading and marked a phrase to review.

'How was it?' Steve asked.

'My nose bled a lot.'

'Oh.' He paused and took a mouthful of food. 'The bruising is looking better.'

'It feels better.'

Steve looked down at his dinner. He smacked his lips and set the fork down. 'This needs more salt.'

It did.

Robin pushed up to her feet and went to grab the shaker from the kitchen. On the way back, she grabbed a bag of frozen peas from the fridge, wrapped it in a towel and pressed it to her face. Maybe she'd ask the girl in her French Literature class how the bruises were healing.